

**Lancaster News**  
**Editorial**

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**Take care of vulnerable in society**

The message was scribbled on a paper plate.

"Feed me. This is the only meal I get. I can't afford groceries."

It was just one of many paper plates sent to S.C. Gov. Mark Sanford.

The paper plate messages were part of a statewide campaign to bring attention to Sanford's proposed \$2.9 million budget cut for the Meals on Wheels program, which now feeds more than 20,000 people across the state.

The budget cut means 5,500 senior citizens in South Carolina - 78 in Lancaster County - could lose those meals. For many low-income seniors, Meals on Wheels provides the only meal they get each day.

Senior activists, the Silver Haired Legislature and AARP are asking to Sanford to reconsider the cut.

The \$2.9 million was a one-time cash infusion in 2007 that allowed the program to add the additional seniors to the meals list.

That's the problem, said Sanford spokesperson Joel Sawyer.

"Unfortunately, this program was funded last year with one-time money that the state won't have access to again, which highlights the problem of paying for ongoing needs with one-time money and the consequences that come as a result of that," Sawyer said.

Sawyer said South Carolina will still get more than \$8 million in federal funding for the program. Cutting the state's budget just means some seniors will have to go back on the waiting list for meals.

To do that would be a "catastrophe," said Sally Sherrin, director of the Lancaster County Council on Aging.

"We would hate to do that," Sherrin added.

Sherrin said those who receive the meals are the most vulnerable senior citizens. They can't prepare the meals themselves or they don't have caretakers who can prepare meals for them.

Keeping a senior citizen healthy and at home is cost effective, advocates say. It costs less to feed a senior citizen one meal a day for a year than for that senior to spend one night in a hospital. It costs between \$500-\$600 a year for a daily meal for a senior citizen. An overnight hospital stay for a person over 65 is between \$20,000-\$25,000. And a year in a nursing home averages \$45,000 for a senior.

The Council on Aging, AARP and the lieutenant governor's office are asking legislators to fund the additional meal expense annually.

Curtis Loftis, director of the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging, said he thinks the General Assembly is receptive to the request. Loftis said most legislators realize those who receive the meals are between 70 and 90 years old and need hot meals.

While Loftis is optimistic, revenue forecasters are not. They estimate the sluggish economy will not be enough to cover increases in education and health-care costs.

But if the funding is not put back into the budget in June, 5,500 senior citizens will come off the meals program and go back on the expanding waiting list.

Senior advocates don't want that to happen. Neither do we.

"It's often the only meal we receive," one elderly woman wrote.

The AARP is encouraging its members in South Carolina to contact their legislators and ask to keep the funding in the budget.

We need to encourage our local legislators, too.

Many of the Meals on Wheels recipients are the most vulnerable members of our society. We encourage legislators to remember that and keep the funding for the meals in the budget.

After all, paper plates should hold food, not a plea for food.